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SELF PORTRAIT

GUS MAGER

GUS MAGER*

BY GUY PÈNE DU BOIS

GUS MAGER, one of the few "post" modern painters whose sincerity is convincing, was born at Newark in 1878 of parents born in Newark. His school education has been most amazingly scanty. At the Newark Sketch Club, where he was given an opportunity to draw from models, he came under the influence of Paul Reininger, who to the present time, except among a circle of intimates, has remained unknown. Mager himself comes forward to acknowledge the influence with a characteristic frankness. To those who, speciously modern, like to deny ancestry, this

confession might seem unnecessary. Mager writes to me: "I came under the influence of a man, four years my senior, Paul Reininger, who came the nearest to Van Gogh, in temperament and genius, even winding up his short career with suicide, as did the big fellow. This Reininger unfortunately went to pieces, nerves and heart, before he actually achieved a stable, sound foundation. Most of his things are in places, incomplete and ticklish, but his sense of color—I'll not go into details—the whole man was an abnormal little genius. His nerves broke down under the strain of his

*The so-called "modernists movement" in art has neither the sympathy nor support of the American Federation of Arts, for it is our conviction that art should primarily concern itself with the interpretation of beauty and that traditions are a precious heritage to be treasured and respected. Neither do we believe that progress can be made by moving backward. But it is well to be informed—to see with one's own eyes and make one's own decisions—and it is in order that our readers may do this that we are publishing this month this admirable article on Gus Mager by Guy Pene du Bois, editor of our contemporary *Arts and Decoration*.—*The Editor*.



THE BIG TREE

GUS MAGER

own intensity. He was not a false alarm." Then Mager tells of years of sketching together, of the interchange of ideas and ambitions and "while I, of an entirely different make-up, could never hope to equal his nervous energy, he has instilled in me a good, lasting determination to make good."

Painters come and go—one immortalizes himself on canvas, another seems to have lived for the benefit, the active benefit, of a friend or a brother—Mager's art education begins with the Newark Sketch Club and Reininger who destroys himself in a fit of morbid desperation. He admires the impressionists. Later he learns to know Cezanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh, a trilogy the clue to whose character is given in a picture of intense idealism and ferocious energy. All around him are

worldly painters whose heads turned by the same sublime picture begin a process of study, in the manner of good schoolmen, which ends in servile imitation. Mager's technical resources are more limited—he has studied in no school—"he never got the chance" and now perhaps he would not take it, if it were offered.

His study has ceased to be a study of art as art. His interest is in nature. Through Reininger and Van Gogh, Cezanne and Gauguin he has been infused with an intense love of the great, throbbing drama being enacted, being lived around him. He no longer inquires into methods of painting and painters, or with the other moderns—he's one unconsciously—into the geometries of Cezanne's line or, the significance of Gauguin's color, the substance of it, or into the fire of Van Gogh's brush-marks.

He arises at daylight, summer and winter, to speak with nature himself, to get the meaning of it for himself, disregarding, as much as any man can, the lessons to be got so much more readily and easily from the canvases of those great predecessors who have inspired him. He is another Descartes. He is not satisfied with inherited learning. He is afraid that there may be "dry rot" clinging to it, hiding some beauty, meaning nothing. At night, the brushes laid aside, he records notes on nature, animals, birds, flowers, weather, or reads works of such literary brothers as are Burroughs, Gilbert White, Audubon—he buys the latest bird books as fast as they appear. He paints nature because he loves or perhaps, since every artist is actuated by some degree of egotism, because he wants the world to know how great it is and how much he loves it. Technique must be of greater bother than interest to him, there are evidences of fierce battle in his pictures, a struggle to overcome unwieldy means, an absence of facility, dexterousness. His hand is well knitted, well tied together, strong, the hand of the laborer, like Millet's, lacking in nimbleness, in grace, in those tricks of manoeuvring, the suaveness with which the virtuoso excites admiration in intellectual drawing-rooms. He is not a drawing-room painter, he is not even an exhibition painter. Indeed it is difficult to admire his technique, his language, from the point of view of the usual tenets of the painter language, so honestly does it display what may be termed his uncouthness. We may admire this or not. The moderns cry out for a repetition of the primitive naïveté they find in certain works of the Egyptians, in certain other works of the painters of Byzantium or again, as with Picasso and Brancusi, in the rude symbolic carvings of the primitive blacks who created their own gods out of pieces of wood and ivory and worshipped them. The blacks least of all these could borrow from ideas born in an artistic past. They had no past. They struggled toward the goal of expression with a child-like simplicity. There was reverence in their work, but it could not have been reverence for artistic tradition. That is a type of snobbishness. The moderns any way have found in this work an alliance with life, religion or aesthet-

ics unembarrassed by the formulas that an established school of art forces upon the children gathered beneath its protecting wing. Their institutions, however, are not dissimilar to those of the rest of mankind. Cry against precedent as they will, avoid it they cannot. Seeking to be naïve, the greatest of modern ambitions, they turn to intellects that have dictated the search and these at a loss, trained by schools and colleges, send them scouting after examples, after precedents. And in the end if we find any originality in them, in the work that accrues, it is in the strangeness of the precedent selected. So that, after all, the virtue of the modern school lies simply in its resurrection of an art discarded as beneath its notice, by the conservative or established body. The originality of Mager is not a matter of the search for and the ultimate selection of a model. That he had spiritual models is unquestionable; what man has not? but like Napoleon, whose model was Alexander, he does not ape the technical resources, the manner of fighting battles, of his hero. Times change, a new code of ethics, of morals, of living, requires a new mode of expression. Man must keep abreast of his time, be as much as expressive as he is a material or integral part of it.

Mager's daily contact with men has been carried on through the medium of newspaper offices where the prevalent philosophy is very apt to mix cynicism and sophistry. He has passed through that trying contact without the loss of a single ideal. And that is positive proof of their grip upon him for with those men, whose lives are spent recording the idiosyncrasies of their fellows, ideals are a type of folly best described as illusive and dreamy. If Mager was ever an idle dreamer, a sentimental spring poet, the contact with those men has planted him on his feet again. But I doubt that there is anything in this theory. His antecedents are to be found among the Dutch painters, the little or the big masters, or even the men of the Hague School led by Israels to certain solid heights before the American market commercialized their output, and later on in Van Gogh, Van Gogh after the trip to France. But while like this Dutch member of the modern trilogy has trans-



BLOSSOMING TREES

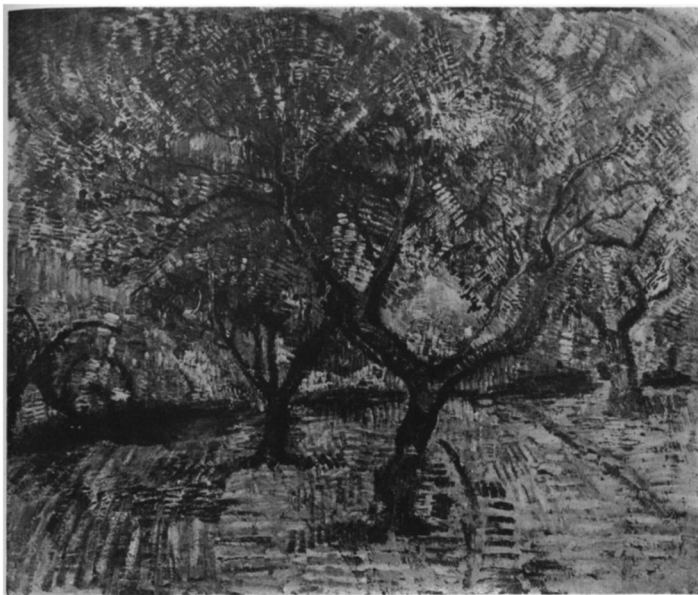
GUS MAGER

fused his landscape with light, it is neither light nor its brother atmosphere which interests him. His heart is taken by more substantial qualities. He is neither Claude Lorraine nor Monet. He is not French. I doubt that he would have any patience with those stanzas that the Comte de Lisle tried to make graceful and that we call classic. He is not in any sense a classicist. He is not a believer in fairy tales. His two feet are planted too firmly upon the ground for that. They inform him of its solidity and almost always, as with the human figures of Rubens, for that is where his heart lies, of a rich, I was going to say, voluptuous potency, for Mager is no more a painter of arid earth than Rubens was of sterile women. And yet for all the luxury of his color and form you will find less sensuousness in them than in, for example, the resonant canvases of that painter among American painters, George Luks.

Mager is a normal man possessed of more perhaps than the ordinary allotment of common sense—common sense as expressed in integrity. Indeed integrity may

be the dominant note of his canvases as it is the dominant note of his character. To those who see in him a wild radical—and they are not a few—I can but ask that they forget, for a moment, the uncouthness or the anarchy of his language and then compare the fundamental manifestation of his work or expression to that of any of the great Dutchmen, come down to us because of an inherent simplicity. You will find the same qualities in both of them, the same appreciation of weight and substance and fertility, the same, though somewhat heavy, rugged touch. Hals is an exception in regard to heaviness. But compare Rembrandt to Rubens, to Veronese or to the much lighter Greuze. The Dutchmen were not graceful painters, and, with another exception to prove still another rule, Matthew Maris, they were never dreamers.

Mager is not only a plain man striking out straight from the shoulder, with no beating about the bush, without tricks of deportment, with no subtlety, but he is also a practical man fully realizing the difficulties of his position and thus bent upon



THE ORCHARD

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reducing them to the simplest, most direct form. If this is not to be found true readily in the details of his language—he uses his brush quite generously, even fitfully—it will be found in the big massive construction of his forms and in the compactness of their marshalling. Here again may be seen the resemblance to the Dutch painters who built their pictures upon horizontal lines inspired by their own flat country, and broke them with vertical lines or very slight variations of the vertical line. There is nothing more naively simple than this arrangement, but neither is there anything more pleasingly satisfactory to the eye nor more honestly dignified. In Mager, however, as in Van Gogh and Reininger, the peacefulness the Dutchmen attained is broken, perhaps because he is of another age, by the accentuation of the old and the introduction of new lines and new angles. Mager admired the nervous energy of his master. Reininger or Van Gogh may have proved for him the existence of that same nervous energy in the surrounding country, or else, and this certainly is plausible, Mager

is merely reproducing the emotions that stir in the air of this not over-peaceful period.

The moderns tell us that “art begins where representation ceases,” and representation with a number of them, as in the case of the cubists, never ceases because it never begins. They try to record subjectively an objective inspiration if all inspirations are not objective—anyway, to quote Kipling, “that is another story.” I do not believe that Mager sets out to do more than give a sort of documentary evidence of the certain thing seen under a certain condition of weather and, of course, of mind. He is objective up to a certain point, after that he is subjective; subjective perhaps, despite himself, telling of the landscape before him and emotionally without consciousness of the world behind and around him. And this whether consciously or unconsciously not because he has studied the dead heroes of art, but because he is a man with a soul, feeling the pulse of his time, the agony, the suffering and the happiness of it.